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# Oral History Project/ Arnold Oswald

Bradley R. Wilmoth

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**Student Interviewer's name:** Bradley Wilmoth

**Interviewee's name:** Arnold Oswald

**Time and Location of Interview:** This interview was conducted in one session on October 18, 2015 and lasted approximately one hour. It was conducted at the home of Arnold Oswald in Cookeville, TN. Only the interviewer and the interviewee were present.

**About Arnold Oswald:**

Arnold Oswald was born in Lyck in East Prussia on November 16, 1929. Mr. Oswald was raised in East Germany. He joined the Hitler Youth in 1939 when he was ten years old. Mr. Oswald was drafted into the German Army at age fourteen and by age 16 he was captured by the British Army, one week before the German Army surrendered. Upon release, Arnold Oswald went to work for a blacksmith, then a welder, and finally a shoemaker before applying to go to the United States. Mr. Oswald was drafted into United States military in 1953, where he worked at Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, Alabama. He married his wife Herta, and they had three children, two of them served in the United States Air Force. This interview covers topics about his experiences in the Hitler Youth, his entry into America, and parts of his time at Redstone Arsenal. It was conducted on October 18, 2015 at his home in Cookeville TN.

*Interviewer: Bradley Wilmoth (BW)*

*Interviewee: Arnold Oswald (AO)*

BW: Alright, um, so just tell me a little bit about your experience in the, uh, Hitler Youth?

**AO: Well you see the Hitler Youth is divided between the young folk as they call from ten to fourteen, and from fourteen to eighteen in the Hitler Youth movement. Then at eighteen you were automatically transferred to the work detailed as they called it Arbeiter Jugends, and they only carried the spades, no guns or anything. After one or two years after that, you're in the army, for a year. Everybody had to go at the time you know, and then you could go out and do your thing, whatever.**

BW: So, when you were in the immediately put in the army,

**AO: I was a young folk.**

BW: Ok

**AO: you know.**

BW: So, um, but, um, what were they doing when they moved someone from the youth to the army?

**AO: Well, they just continued,**

BW: When they do that one year period of work, and go to the Army, did they just do further training?

**AO: Naturally, yeah, you see. If you go to grammar school, eight years. After that, you have to take a test, if you can continue to go to high school. You don't have it. You have to learn a trade. You go to trade school once a week, and of course, then you go and work. You have to find a job. You know, um, and that is when your fourteen, you know, and that's it when you go into the work detail, or whatever you want to call it, ah, you have a job already. You know, a guide or the boss would give you the, ah, the, year off and that's it.**

BW: okay, um, so when you were in school, um, I read somewhere that was..

**AO: See when your ten year's old, if I may interrupt you. Ten years old when in school already you get signed up for the young folk, ok, and then the following week or so whenever it was, you go once a week for about two hours, you go and get trained. You know, training is actually no different than boy scouts or cub scouts. You learn how to read a map, you know, a compass, have camp fires and what have you.**

BW: So, it basically like, similar to like boy's scouts?

**AO: Yeah, practically the same thing, no different. We do not have a gun, they don't teach you how to shoot, and this is the misconception that a lot of people have here. They all they go, ahhh, they're being trained to shoot, and kill, no such thing. Even the guys that were in the work force when the eighteen years old didn't have a gun. Not until they were in the army. That's when they get trained on guns, and with guns, okay. But, uh, in the work detail they had spades. All the stuff you do with a rifle, they did with the spade, and then they had to work. They had the farmers of course, then they had their own thing to do like, uh, in cities or towns, you know that needed extra help that where they had to go, and then do their job.**

BW: Okay

**AO: And of course, they were also trained how to march, and do all the good things, you know. They live like, uh, an army man, I would say, you know. Okay see, then in the young folk, you're to, ah, once a year you go on vacation with them if you will. You live in a tent, ah, they make groups. Then one group will disappear the other group has to find you, by map and what have you, stuff like that. No different than, ah, Boy Scouts, I would assume.**

BW: Yeah.

**AO: You know.**

BW: Um so, tell me a little bit about your experience during the whole war? If your comfortable talking about it.

**AO: I hate to do that but, uh,**

**BW: Just a little bit of your story, if you're comfortable.**

**AO: Well, let's put this way I was in a special school, I don't want to get into details about that.**

**BW: Okay.**

**AO: We were assigned to a regular army, unit. We had a band on your arm, you know, like Luftwaffe's, you know. You wanna write it down, go ahead doesn't make any difference, ah, we ah, actually by the time I was in and that was already the end of forty-four. That was practically the end (chuckles). We were always retreating, you know. Sometimes, oh we have to go and help that group, but then the command came, no we have to go back and find another place or whatever, you know. So we were always retreating, we would really never in close combat, know.**

**BW: How old were you at that time?**

**AO: Fourteen, and uh, well ah, I got captured, ah, what was it May? No April, the thirtieth or so, in 1945, by the British. They treated me great, I can't complain. In fact, the whole group got caught, you know, and uh, and the British treated us more than humanly possible, you know, ah, but there was a reason, because we on a little island so to speak, you couldn't escape, because you had to go through a river to escape. If you go in the river, the army, the British army, was up there knocking you off in the water. And they did with a few people that thought they can do it, but that's minor really.**

**BW: What was the Island called?**

**AO: No I don't, it's in German, and ah, if I see it on a map again I would remember, but ah, you know.**

**BW: Did you fear for life at that time?**

**AO: Oh many times, but, you know at the end you get to a point where you say, if they kill me they kill me, you know. See, in other thing too, one time we were three boys, walking on a highway. Not a super-duper highway, just a regular highway, and then we heard airplanes. Oh, there were only two or three airplanes, so we said now what, they had already had seen us, you know. So we jumped into a ditch on the side while these guys go past us, turn around come from that other side and shoot in there. They didn't want to kill us, to be very honest I can tell you that, because they had to go the other way around, and they would have had us from the front, you know, but then we jumped over to the other side, they went around, and they shot on the other side, you know, and those are American planes. American planes were there bombing, and so during the day. The British during the night, and that's about it, you know. So, ah, other than that in the war, yeah we were close, when the Russians were coming in. You know we were maybe within a quarter mile or even closer than that to them. But then, one time I remember in particular, we were all of a sudden we were sleeping, it was night, so it was around 2:00, and there was gunfire.**

Plenty of it, so, naturally you wake up and everybody around right in formation, but then, as we were going to go toward the Russians, another group of German army, regular army, was coming down and the commander said “you guys, you boys!” he called us “you’re going this way!” He was going the other way for safety. So the army guys went there, and whatever happened to them most likely they were knocked off, or when you became a Russian prisoner, you didn’t want to be.

My dad was a prisoner, he was captured in 1945. He didn’t come home until 1949. He was a guy 180 to 190 pounds. When he came home he was 120, and he was lucky because he spoke the language, okay. And he became the driver of a Russian commander, and this commander went through prison camps, and my dad had to drive him, and when he got out my dad went into the town which usually little town, you know, and talked to the people and they treated him well, gave him some food to eat, you know, but that wasn’t every day. That’s way he lost so much, but ah, many of these prisoners never came home. My brother was captured by the Americans, and there were quite a few Polish soldiers there. I wouldn’t call them soldiers, they were already American soldiers, but of Polish descent. They didn’t like the Germans. They didn’t treat them exactly very well. If you didn’t take a command very quickly they would kick you, or would do something. Which is normal really, in the war. So he escaped, he was lucky he escaped. And, ah, I got let go from my prison camp in 1945, it was about September. Yeah, early September, and I had paperwork and everything.

See at that in Germany, in order for you to eat, at least as an adult, you needed food stamps, you know. And to have food stamps, you had to prove age and everything else. And that I had, my brother did not. We met in Düsseldorf, it’s a big city. Anyhow, and he changed some of the stuff, he took my paper work, and that’s it.

Then about a months later we went to the eastern zone, you know, Russian zone

BW: Yeah?

AO: And that’s the funny part, because a lot of people went over there to pick up their relatives, or so, we went there to pick up my mother and my sister. They got stuck there. And, ah, so as we were divided, so not everybody would go at the same time. I went with another two guys, we were walking, and one of turn around and says “Look at this, there doin’ it just like the Germans, they chase their soldiers”. In reality they were far enough away we couldn’t see, they were chasing my brother and somebody else.

BW: Oh no!

AO: Yes, he was in jail, I think they kept him for four days or five days, then they let him go. What could they do? He didn’t tell them who he fought or anything, besides he wasn’t in the German navy. The Russians at that time didn’t have much to begin with, but anyhow, to make long story short, we picked up my mother, and my sister, and of course we had to go over the border at night again, and we went along the railroad track, and of course most of the boards going across, they were gone. So we had to sort a balance, and

**then go step on one, but anyhow, my mother fell and hung on, you know, and we were about six, seven, and eight yards across.**

BW: So, was that like a bridge?

**AO: Yeah, it was over a bridge, over the water. It was kind a hard to keep quiet. When that happens and your mother hangs there, but anyhow we got her out, and the guards never noticed us, so that was the good part. Well then, we came to western zone where there was everything wonderful there, you know. Whether it was a British zone or and American zone, even better, but they had the southern part of Germany. That's where the Americans were. We arrived at the British Zone. So anyhow, what else would you like to know?**

BW: Oh, um, getting kind a back towards the Hitler youth thing.

**AO: Okay.**

BW: When you were in the Hitler Youth did they use any methods of indoctrinating into Nazism?

**AO: Well you know let's put it this way. You got trained to salute, Hiel Hitler, one of the leaders came to you, and you stood at attention, unless he said at ease, you know. It's like any army here. We learn how to march, you know, ah, lots of sports, running, and always competitive against other groups. From the other town or what have you.**

BW: Besides sports and stuff, did they have you doing stuff in the classrooms? That would help towards indoctrinating.

**AO: See this is one of those things that was a little exaggerated about Nazism.**

BW: Really?

**AO: I did not know the word Nazi, till I came to the United States. Nazi? What's Nazi? Actually what you had was called the Party, and it was called the National Socialistic Workers Party. That's what it was, and from that the Americans came up with the word Nazi. N-S- D-A-P, you know, Nazi party. But we didn't call it Nazi, we always called it the National Socialistic Workers Party, we never used the abbreviation, no.**

BW: Okay.

BW: Did your Army commanders try to protect the younger members of the army at that time? Or did they just kind a throw you out, to just kind a go into a confused fight?

**AO: No, no, don't forget it was toward the end of the war. No matter what they needed men, so you're going to do no matter what. They tell you, you do it. One of the groups my age, they were riding trains, you know, the back car of the trains. And, ah, they were trained to shoot as the airplanes approached. Oh, what's that the gun called?**

BW: Anti- Air craft guns?

**AO:** Yeah, anti-aircraft, they were trained in that, you know. And they were riding all the trains to defend against enemy aircraft. And I came to that one group where I was supposed to bandage some guys. I asked for a couple of guys that were no longer there no more. They were killed. I ran into some of my buddies that were still bandaged up, you know, where they got hit from gunfire from those airplanes. And, ah, that's about it. I was lucky, to be honest I wasn't the best soldier, or the best Hitler youth (chuckles). I remember I had run away a couple of times. At one time, I was in Berlin, because I was in Berlin in 1938, and I run away from them, cause I wanted to be far from Berlin. And, ah, I needed to stay somewhere overnight, you know. And, ah, the next morning, they were bombing across. See, Berlin is divided in so many smaller areas, Potsdam, and ah, Charlottenburg, and I wanted to go to Charlottenburg, but that's beside the point. Anyhow, in the morning, I started walking, and then somebody behind me goes (whistles) "Hey you!"

I knew who it was, it was one of those guys who didn't want to see you run away. So I went faster, faster, and I said I better stop. And he was there before I knew it anyhow. And that's how they sent me back to my group.

**BW:** Did you get in trouble for that?

**AO:** No, That was the good part, that was only the second part. The first part was back there to my regular group and we were marching, and that was the Northern part of Germany. That I remember very well, Schleswig-Holstein, that what they called it, Okay. And, we were in the woods, and, ah, I'm talking about the end now. We all had beautiful uniforms, and I said "man, I'm going to make a nice beautiful hole, so I can put my stuff in there, and after war then I can go pick it up". That was my thinking, you know (chuckles). And as we came out of the woods, the British captured us, telling us to "hold!" We put our hands up, and that was the end of the war for me. The war ended in May of 1945, and I was captured a few days before. What else do you want to know?

**BW:** Oh, ah, give me a minute.

**AO:** I had run away three times, cause I didn't want anything to do with the war (chuckles). Honestly, even as a young guy at that time, I said it's stupid. I remember telling God "Where are you, I'm being shot at!" God never showed up, and that's the way I felt at the time. I actually became a Christian, and I'm a real believer in Christianity. I became a believer when I saw heaven.

**BW:** When you were trying to run away from the youth, we're basically trying to get out of the country or we're just trying to get into a different area?

**AO:** I had no home, see I was born in East Prussia. The closest border was about 9 miles from us, and that was then Poland. Then the Russians during the war came into East Germany, and we were leaving. My mother took the last train in fact, one of the party members, if you will, came and said "Mrs. Oswald, what are you doing here?" and she said "Well, shouldn't I be here?" And he says, "No the last train waiting there, and it's gonna

leave in an hour, or so.” So she packed little stuff, run to the train station, and caught the last train.

Didn’t go very far away, so she wouldn’t be captured by the Russians. The Russians, oh I hate to say it again. They were beasts, okay, one thing I know for a fact, it’s documented. They lined up sixteen women, German women, they, (pause) they raped them, and it wasn’t just one guys each, but the whole company, you know. And after they were done, they knocked them off. That was it, the Russians did that. They didn’t take many prisoners. Okay what else?

BW: When you were captured by the British, did they take you to England?

AO: When I got captured by the British, I was in a camp. They would interview ever so often, and ask you, where do you live? Where did you live? Can you go back home? Of course not, (chuckles) I wouldn’t go back home. In that part of Germany, nobody wanted to go home, and nobody did. Anything under the Russian occupation, people were not interested in going back, because they were not the nicest like I said.

BW: So, those times you were escaping did you try to leave the country?

AO: Oh, anywhere, yes, just away from carrying from a gun. I wasn’t made for it period. When I was in the U. S army, never carried a gun. They picked me up by car (chuckles) drove me to the rifles range. They gave me a gun, they told me how to hold a gun which I knew. Then then ordered me to aim, shoot and that’s it. I shot, then I hopped back in the car, went back to the office. That was my U.S Army (chuckles).

The reason I didn’t have to, there was several different things. When I came to the Army here. I came here ‘52 and then in November 1953, I got drafted. I got drafted, and they wanted to send me to boot camp, no doubt about. After boot camp, I went into Georgia, Motor Pool, where I spent my time. They wanted to send me to first Hawaii, I was a line man, and yet on the bus they told me “Oh you’re not going anywhere.” I said okay, I not going. Then I was supposed to go to Korea. And I told them “I’m not going”, he says “why not?” I said “I’m not an American citizen, how can you send me?” Two months later, the judge was there and I became a U.S citizen. (chuckles) <sup>1</sup>

I mean I didn’t have to wait five years, don’t forget. So, ok, then, I was interviewed by the FBI. I don’t like that, but it’s a fact.

BW: You got interviewed by the FBI, when you arrived into the U.S?

AO: No, I got drafted.

BW: Oh, when you got drafted, that makes sense.

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<sup>1</sup> The events that were discussed on this page were the experiences that happened to Mr. Oswald during his term in the United States Army during the Korean War.



**AO:** I was an American soldier already. The agent wanted to know my background, where I'm from, ah, what unit I belonged to at that time, and you know. What I have done during that time and what have you. In the Hitler Youth movement. I was a leader by the way, you know. I had nine kids under me, they were all my age, but you know, you needed somebody.

**BW:** Oh, yeah.

**AO:** I told them that I was in the Hitler Youth movement, and that I was a leader. That's why I became a special investigation. Me, being 15 years old and a leader. The room was longer than from here to the wall. It was no wider than the opening here. The FBI agents sat there, I sat here. I started walking toward him he said "hold it soldier, you gotta sit there." But then he came back a few weeks later and said "You're already, you know it's stupid what I done, but that's the rules, so on so forth." They then sent me to Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville Alabama. In the mean-time I refused quite a few transfers, because I was a special investigation, I could do it.

**BW:** So, this was all during the Korean War?

**AO:** Yeah

**BW:** Okay, What else did you do during the Korean Conflict?

**AO:** And ah, so they sent me to Redstone Arsenal, and Redstone Arsenal, I don't know if you're familiar with it. That where they have all the German rocketry. They had I don't know how many Germans working at Redstone Arsenal. I met quite a few, and ah, I had a wonderful life. The only thing I couldn't make was rank. Special investigation, you know, so I couldn't make any more money, and that was my goal at that time (chuckles).

**BW:** So, how did you...

**AO:** I didn't have to march. I could refuse to march.

**BW:** Oh.

**AO:** Oh yeah! I could do what I want. That was in the American Army.

**BW:** How did you get here to America?

**AO:** After the war, I needed a place to stay. And I found my mother. At least I had an address. I went to a place kind off like a labor union, and I asked for a job. I didn't have a background in anything, you know. She said "if you want to become a blacksmith, I can get you in a different town, but you'll have a roof over your head and you'll have food." So I went, I became a blacksmith, didn't know a damn thing about it. I made 10 marks a week or ten dollars a week. We worked seven to seven, then we had dinner, then we went into the field until dark, six days a week. That's when I said I ain't going to do that forever. After I was done with this, took four years to learn the trade. See that's what you do, over there you learn a trade, you learn. You have a piece of iron, what's that iron made off? How can

**you bend it, and all that good stuff. I mean they go into details that's really not necessary for a guy that's just a worker.**

BW: Was that while you were in the youth, or is that right after World War two?

**AO: After World War two,**

BW: Was this like in Britain...

**AO: That was in Germany.**

BW: Okay.

**AO: At that time, they called it West Germany. And ah, you know, after four years I became a welder, for a little bit. I was a shoe maker for a little bit, but everywhere I was a found a place to stay. That was the only way, nobody was going to take you in if you don't know anything. Everybody's family was split apart, nobody knew where anyone was, you know. My Dad, we didn't know that he was alive til a few months before he came home. When he went in a camp in Germany already, you know, but that's besides the point. Then I applied for America, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. And I said whatever accepts me first, I go. I take no matter what, the U.S came and I said man I'm going. And here I am.**

BW: When you came to United States how were you received?

**AO: When you get here, they made sure that they put you into places where at least one person knew the language, Okay. I was given fifty dollars from my sponsor. You see we could not bring in German money, I had to work off that fifty dollars. So is there anything else you want to ask me about the Hitler Youth, that wasn't very much now was it?**

BW: No, I had known some, but it is good to get the misconceptions out of the way though.

**AO: One thing that you need to know is that it is the same as the Boy Scouts. Except that our drill to march was a little stricter than here. We wanted to look more like the German Soldiers, you know. That's about the only difference that I seen. Other than that, a lot of people my age or a little younger that were in the Hitler Youth like I was, they will tell you different stories. A lot of them will lie, you know, because Hitler, see that's in their mind, oh I was under Hitler this and that. I had told guys myself at meetings or so, I said don't give me the story, I was there too. I was raised in the same area, and you're telling stories. Some guys said "well yeah what else are you going to do". I said no tell the truth, the way it is. A lot of people did tell stories.**

**People were crazy about Hitler, he gave them work, he gave them the incentive to save money for a house or a car. Work galore, wouldn't you go for a guy like that. He didn't force you to join the party. He tell you all the time, you will have certain benefits if you join the party, and most people did. No doubt about it, probably 90% of all the working people in Germany belong to the party. A lot of people will tell you just the opposite. To be honest, you looked forward to go the meeting once a week, because you got to see all you buddies**

**again. See we didn't all go to the same school, we were separated between the boy's school and the girl's school.**

BW: So did anyone else in your family get to come to the U.S?

**AO: No, me the only one. No one else in my family got to come to America. I went back to Germany some years ago to visit my older sister. So is there anything else you liked to know about the Youth? If I know something I tell you.**

BW: Basically, I wanted to hear your story and the events that happened, and those were the questions that I really had over the Hitler youth. Thank you for allowing me to interview you, I know that some topics must be hard to talk about.

**AO: No, what happened, happened. I'd be happy to talk to your professor more about the Hitler Youth.**

BW: Thanks (chuckles).